

“Fire and Ice”

Complete Text

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice, 5
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

Summary

The speaker considers the age-old question of whether the world will end in fire or in ice. This is similar to another age-old question: whether it would be preferable to freeze to death or burn to death. The speaker determines that either option would achieve its purpose sufficiently well.

Form

“Fire and Ice” follows an invented form, irregularly interweaving three rhymes and two line lengths into a poem of nine lines. Each line ends either with an *-ire*, *-ice*, or *-ate* rhyme. Each line contains either four or eight syllables. Each line can be read naturally as iambic, although this is not strictly necessary for several lines. Frost employs strong enjambment in line 7 to great effect.

Commentary

An extremely compact little lyric, “Fire and Ice” combines humor, fury, detachment, forthrightness, and reserve in an airtight package. Not a syllable is wasted. The aim is aphorism—the slaying of the elusive Truth-beast with one unerring stroke. But for Frost, as usual, the truth remains ambiguous and the question goes unanswered; to settle for aphorism would be to oversimplify.

We can attribute part of the poem’s effect to the contrast between the simple, clipped precision of its vocabulary and the vague gravity of its subject. The real triumph of “Fire and Ice,” however, is in its form. Try writing the poem out in prose lines. Nearly all poems suffer considerably in this exercise, but this poem simply dies:

Some say the world will end in fire. Some say in ice. From what I’ve tasted of desire I hold with those who favor fire. But if it had to perish twice, I think I know enough of hate to say that, for destruction, ice is also great and would suffice.

The language remains simple, but the devastating, soaring anticlimax of the final two lines is lost. Those lines draw their soft-kill power from form: from their rhymes; from the juxtaposition of their short, punchy length with that of the preceding lines (and their resonance with the length of the second line); and from the strong enjambment in line 7, which builds up the tension needed for the perfect letdown.

It is one thing to pull off an offhand remark about the end of days; it is another to make it poetry. Frost masterfully accomplishes both in a single